

ZEPHANIAH LOWE

History is a record, oral or written of past events. As a descendant of two pioneer families - the Gillhams who settled in the Alton Area shortly after the close of the Revolutionary War, and the Lowe's who settled in Alton in 1827 - I am naturally interested in early Alton History. What truer record can there be than that found in old family letters and manuscripts?

It is upon an old faded letter and stories told by the writer of the letter that I base the following story.

Zephaniah Lowe, my Great Uncle, was born in Virginia in 1799. He died in October 1890. He was the son of William A. Lowe, Sr. and Christiana Elkins Lowe, both of whose forebears had settled in Virginia very early in the eighteenth century.

Like many others of that period his education was limited to that provided in crude log cabin schools. In spite of scarcity of opportunity he was considered a highly intelligent and forceful man.

Family records and word of mouth tell the story of Zephaniah Lowe and of his younger brother William A. Lowe, Jr., who with their wives and numerous children of all ages left their homes in Virginia, and after a long and difficult journey settled in Alton in 1827.

They traveled by wagon to the Kanawha River, then by Ohio River boat to the Mississippi River, finally reaching St. Louis. Here the wives and the children, including my Grandfather Sylvester Lowe then fifteen years of age, remained for three months while Zephaniah and William, Jr. continued the trip in search of a place where they would settle permanently. According to a story told by Zephaniah Lowe, they walked from St. Louis until they reached Alton, then a small settlement (mostly log cabins) which had been established ten years before by Rufus Easton. This was ten years before Alton received a City Charter and Elijah Lovejoy was assassinated. According to the story, the days on the trip from St. Louis were "fairly tolerable" but the nights were made hideous by howls of prowling panthers, screeching of owls and immense swarms of mosquitos. Some members of the family built their cabins and remained in Lower Alton but most of them settled in Upper Alton. The families increased throughout the years, until as a young girl I heard frequent jokes about how the Lowe's and dog-fennel practically took over Upper Alton.

In an article appearing in an early Alton Evening Telegraph - Zephaniah Lowe was recognized as Alton's foremost builder and home designer. He planned and built many of Alton's nice early homes. He had the contract for planning and building the first Lincoln School building - a small frame, on the site of the present brick school (Norris Centennial History 1912). I have his small crude estimate for the old Hunter's Tavern. Unfortunately, many of these landmarks have been sacrificed to so called "Progress."

Perhaps the chief accomplishment of Zephaniah Lowe was the designing and building of the Shurtleff College Men's Dormitory in 1840. I have a fragile yellowed letter written by him to his father-in-law in Missouri. Quoting that letter:-

"Upper Alton - March 8, 1840. I did think sometime ago that I would come

out and see you all this spring. But my business will not admit of it this season for I have undertaken a large contract of erecting a large College building in Upper Alton. The top size of this building to be 120 feet long, 44 feet wide and four stories above the basement. I am bound by contract to have this completed by November, 1840."

Specifications called also for sixty-four rooms, wide halls and a cupola with a bell. The original plans were for many years preserved by his daughter Mary, the wife of Captain William La Mothe, a well known early boat builder and river boat Captain. I know of no living LaMothe descendant, nor do I know what became of the plans.

This building would be a very small accomplishment by today's building standards, but built practically in the wilderness with brick made on the premises and some of the lumber obtained from trees growing on the site, much of it dressed by hand plane it was no mean achievement for that day. Throughout the years this dormitory became the cultural center and to some extent a social center in the small village of Upper Alton.

The "Old Dorm" as it was affectionately called, continued in use for different purposes until it was destroyed by fire in 1939. To younger generations the fire was, no doubt, just the end of an old, outdated building in need of many repairs, but many oldsters who recognized its valuable services throughout the years had 'much the feeling one might have upon stepping out of his door in the morning to find a fine old oak had been felled by a storm in the night.

I grew up in the shadow of Shurtleff College. Mr parent's five acre home site that fronted for a block on Edwards Street extended northward to the South boundary of the campus. "Uncle Zeff's" home was a large rock house on College Avenue across from the dormitory. This house was replaced by the large brick Cole-Clark home - and later the property was acquired by Shurtleff College.

Zephaniah Lowe's home became a haven for teachers, who coming from comfortable Eastern homes, were reluctant to acquire property until they were certain they wished to stay in this virtual wilderness. Among families who found a temporary home there - was that of Prof. Warren Leverett. It was here his daughter, Sarah (Mrs. William Stiffler) a revered lady who lived past the century mark - was born.

Zephaniah Lowe's last years were spent in the LaMothe home. He came very often to my parents home 3 blocks away. Tho a very little girl I remember him as a handsome purposeful man with wavy snow white hair. His twinkling blue eyes belied his somewhat stern appearance. To him I was little Sudie and he told me many fascinating stories of the trip from Virginia and of Shurtleff College.

There were no real labor problems in thos days but there did exist the very grave problem of existence. It was an era when a man earned his bread by the sweat of his brow - by any honest means. I have forgotten much that I

wish I had retained but I do remember the challenging remarks: "There was a job for every man who wanted to work." We worked from Sunrise to Sunset except on the Lord's Day - but the main job was finished on time and a number of boys moved in.

Newspaper accounts at time of the fire discredited this last statement claiming the building planned in 1839 was used first in 1844 except for 2 rooms that were used in 1841 and that building was not completed until 1853 although conceding the 4 walls of the structure had been reared. It is possible that only the first floor was completed sufficiently for occupancy when a number of boys moved in in 1840.

It is conceivable that with crude equipment, a certain amount of bad weather and many obstacles to be overcome - a four story building containing 64 rooms each equipped to accommodate a heating stove could not be entirely finished in 8 months.

Time has erased the names of the builders and fire has erased the Old Dorm so this story has little value except to show the integrity and fortitude of men who lived in Alton many years ago.

So I tell my little story as I heard it many years ago, from the lips of the man who in 1840 wrote that fragile, yellowed letter.

Mrs. John W. (Sue Lowe) Olmstead Sr.